

The golf industry's wild, wild ride



Michael Levans,
editor

The question I was most frequently asked on the show floor was the exact same question we ask each other here in the GCN editorial office at least once a week — how long can the golf course industry continue on this wild development ride?

I answered with a shoulder shrug and a faint smile, "I don't see it ending any time soon."

Our office is bombarded daily basis by every form of media available with news of new projects, groundbreaking and plans "hot off the drawing board." At the show, which offers us the old-fashioned medium of cocktail-party banter, I was told by some of the design game's biggest hitters that their offices have never been so busy.

One architect in particular told me that January was the biggest month for new business his office has ever seen...ever. When I posed the burning question he cocked his head and smiled, "I hope it goes forever."

- On a somewhat related note, I was happy to see a number of The First Tee banners fly high above the booths. It seems that the organization hasn't wasted an opportunity to spread the word about its mission of bringing golf to the inner-city to grow participation. Granted, it has its naysayers, but GCN isn't one of them. This program was too long in coming.

Two bits of required reading this month if you're interested in keeping the golf course architects busy into the next century: Mark Leslie's cover story on The First Tee project in Richmond, which was up against some ridiculous opposition, and Trevor Ledger's piece (page 13) on the emergence of "golf courts" in the UK. Play a regulation-length 18 holes in 15 acres? Give it a look.

- High technology continues to creep its way into the superintendent's worklife. John Deere and Toro were proudly highlighting their new GPS affiliations and exactly what it could mean for the future of the business.

As you've read in this column before, I believe that this advanced technology is going to grind ahead ever so slowly, persistently, until it's sitting in the shed or on the desk of every superintendent in the country. What did I hear at the show?

Robotic mowers? You bet. Integrated systems tying together ever facet of your golf operation from tee times to tee box fertilizer application rates? Yes. Real-time information from every piece of equipment you have on the course downloading to your CPU in order to give you a minute-by-minute update of what it's costing you to maintain your course? It's being done.

Never say never. High-tech is something that can't be ignored. Don't be left out.

- One last note: Many of you told us that we don't look a thing like our drawings (above). This might be the last time you'll see them.

Saving trees or kids?

The feeling that superintendents are the true environmentalists — and that some activists are either overzealous or mere pretenders — took voice in different, and sometimes surprising, venues at the GCSAA's International Golf Course Conference and Show.

During the Environmental General Session, PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem mentioned a First Tee project that environmental activists were opposing in one city. "The mayor," Finchem related, "said to them, 'You're in here talking about saving a couple of trees. We're talking about saving lives.'"

And Rick Geise, director of marketing for Griffin Industries, which put its thousands of acres at more than 20 locations into the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, said: "Quite frankly, we've had trouble with environmental groups before. The Sierra Club and others say, basically, that all business is bad. We said, 'How can we be bad? We are, in simplest terms, recycling. We provide jobs and add to the economy, the tax base, everything. But some people say, 'It's got to be bad; we saw steam coming out of your building.'"



Mark Leslie,
managing editor

On the other hand, Geise said Audubon International President Ron Dodson told him, "I drove a car to work today, too. Let's be realistic." Realism. Hum. Interesting thought.

Served up with gusto, here are some other post-partem morsels from the Environmental General Session:

- Executive Vice President Jim Singerling of the Club Managers Association of America said association intends to take the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program facilitywide.

"We want to ensure that the whole facility is covered, not just the golf course," Singerling said. "We will be pushing that initiative over the next 18 months so the public sees the facility as an environmental asset."

- The superintendent is to the golf course what a chef is to a great restaurant, said LPGA Tour Commissioner Jim Ritts.

To which USGA Executive Director David Fay told the audience of superintendents: "You are the chefs. Twenty years ago, too many considered you the short-order cooks."

Ritts added that the LPGA's members acknowledge superintendents' contributions, and tournament winners always thank the course's super. "We think this will raise the level of respect for your profession," he said.

- PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem said the public must be told that "agronomically, these are not [course] conditions that can be continually maintained. It is an enormous amount of pressure on the golf course."

- Asking what to do to provide affordable, accessible golf, PGA of America Executive Director and CEO Jim Awtry said: "I cringe when I hear \$20 to \$25 green fees fits that criteria. I would not have been able to play growing up at the cost in the Midwest..."

"Twelve dollars per round could create some real incremental growth."

- Fay extolled The First Tee program, saying: "The public has embraced the concept. The private sector is lining up. The golf

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SPOTLIGHT ON ASIA

Thai 'fire sale' looks to sell off golf

By ANDREW OVERBECK

BANGKOK, Thailand — In the wake of the failed "fire sale" of non-performing loans Dec. 15, Thailand's Financial Restructuring Authority (FRA) called for a second round of auctioning that is scheduled for March 10.

There are 7,124 business loans worth 231 billion baht (\$US 6.4 billion) up for grabs in this round, including numerous golf courses and country clubs.

The Dec. 15 auction netted just 25.1 percent of the nominal value of assets valued at 156 billion baht (\$4.3 billion) and the golf course tranche did not sell. According to Greg Green of the U.S.-based Pavilion Fund, there are many reasons why the golf courses did not move the first time around.

"The properties were not looking very profitable. And unless you can buy them very cheaply, you won't make your money back for a really, really long time," said Green. Prospective foreign investors realize that golf courses have negative value at the moment due to the cost of upkeep and the fact

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ARTHUR DAVIS 1940-1999

GAINESVILLE, Ga. — Golf course architect Arthur Davis, 59, died on Jan. 31. Mr. Davis was a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) since 1974 and was involved in the design and/or construction of over 150 golf courses.

Born in Georgia, Mr. Davis attended Abraham Baldwin College in Tifton where he met ASGCA members Robert Trent Jones Sr., George Cobb and others, who steered Davis to golf course architecture. He received a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Georgia in 1963.

Davis began his career with ASGCA Fellow Willard Byrd, striking out on his own in 1967. In 1970, he formed a partnership with ASGCA member Ron Kirby, which soon included tour golfer Gary Player. In 1973, Davis established his own practice, which continued to be based in Georgia and eventually included his son, Lee.

Most of his work through the years was in the Southern Belt of the United States, from Georgia on the east to New Mexico on the west, but also included Asia, South America, Africa and Europe. His designs include Lake Lanier Island Golf Course (now Stouffer's Pine Isle) in Buford, Ga.; River North in Macon, Ga.; Cartersville Country Club in Cartersville, Ga.; El Paraiso in Marabella, Spain; and Alto Village in Alto, N.M. Mr. Davis is survived by his wife, Joyce, mother LaRue, daughter and son-in-law Cindy and Chris White; son Lee and three grandchildren.

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SCOTLAND

IMG, ETC discuss Greenan project, development on the move

By TREVOR LEDGER

AYRSHIRE, Scotland — The West Coast of Scotland, home to such classic links as Royal Troon and Turnberry, is to have two further courses.

Greenan, just south of Ayr and Southern Gailes, on the coast be-

tween Troon and Irvine, have been put on the market for development as golf and leisure facilities by the respective local authorities; South Ayrshire Council and North Ayrshire Council.

The Greenan project is at an advanced stage with Interna-

tional Management Group (IMG) currently discussing the potential facility options with European Tour Courses.

The site is said to be topographically challenging as a site for a golf course, but with sufficient potential for IMG to go through a

lengthy planning process.

The Secretary of State for Scotland has approved the project, the value of which is more than £20 million.

The Southern Gailes site is adjacent to, and slightly inland of, the renowned Western Gailes Golf Course with the ubiquitous railway line separating the two. The development process is at a less-advanced stage than at

Greenan, with the initial development proposals which were due for council's consideration by the end of January.

All of this land has been used for golf for hundreds of years — Glasgow Gailes and Kilmarnock Barrassie golf clubs also being near neighbors. The Dundonald Golf Club used to occupy the Southern Gailes site but fell into disrepair during the World War II as did so many others.

Research by local journalists has failed to uncover any information on the defunct Dundonald outfit, the history of which is very hazy.

• ASIAN UPDATE •

'Fire Sale'

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that housing lots cannot be used to recover costs since the real estate market is depressed.

Green identified the lack of foreclosure laws as one of the basic faults of the first auction that led to low bidding by foreign investors.

"If there were enforceable foreclosure laws, bids would have been 50-100% higher," said Green. At press time, foreclosure legislation was still being stalled by the Thai Senate. It is widely held that many senators are blocking the legislation in order to protect their own highly-leveraged business interests. Insiders predict the continued consideration of foreclosure and bankruptcy laws will decrease the overall attractiveness of assets.

Furthermore, the lack of clarity over whether investors could have conversations with debtors before the bidding process began and the poor timing of the event over the Christmas holidays led to depressed sales. "They have done a remarkable job so far," said Green. "But it is still not perfect."

Things may be looking up for the golf course tranche the second time around. First, the FRA has agreed to reduce the size of the tranches which should attract more foreign investors and increase the level of competition for the assets. There has also been increased movement in the golf share market. This has begun to buy golf shares again not only because they have become more affordable but also because many believe that the market has bottomed out. This should catch the eyes of investors.

"Hell, if I had a golf course fund, I would buy some of these courses and hold on for a little while. You might not get the wild returns, but in the end you will own a tremendous golf course that you got at a great price," said Green.

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